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# CONTROL CANNIBALISM IN YOUR POULTRY FLOCK

by

## DEBEAKING

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Cannibalism in poultry is an age-old problem. It is of more economic importance today than previously because of larger commercial flocks. It takes several forms, such as feather pulling, toe picking, vent picking, tail pulling, and sometimes picking of other parts of the body. All species of poultry have shown cannibalistic tendencies at one time or another.

Usually cannibalism can be traced to a managerial problem, but sometimes it causes considerable anxiety and confusion because the grower has difficulty determining the reason for it.

Many causes of cannibalism have been suggested, but often similar conditions on other farms cause no trouble.

Suggested conditions causing cannibalism include; feeding only pellets, cafeteria system of feeding, too much corn, not feeding oats, insufficient salt, low protein, crowding, high brooder temperatures, not enough feeders and/or waterers, being without feed for too long, improper height of feeders and/or waterers, not enough nests, nests too light, and too much light in the house. Some claim the tendency is inherited, but this is difficult to prove although some strains are more nervous than others.

The best control for cannibalism is to *prevent it*. Once it starts it is sometimes difficult to stop.

In the past many remedies have been used such as hanging cabbage, beets or other vegetables in the coop, painting the windows red, darkening the coop, tarring picked birds, using no-pick salves, using additional salt in the feed, adding salt to the drinking water, feeding oats, and probably many others. Some of these remedies give results in some instances, but by the time the correct one is found by

Figure 1. Debeaking a pullet, showing the correct procedure for holding the bird while debeaking.

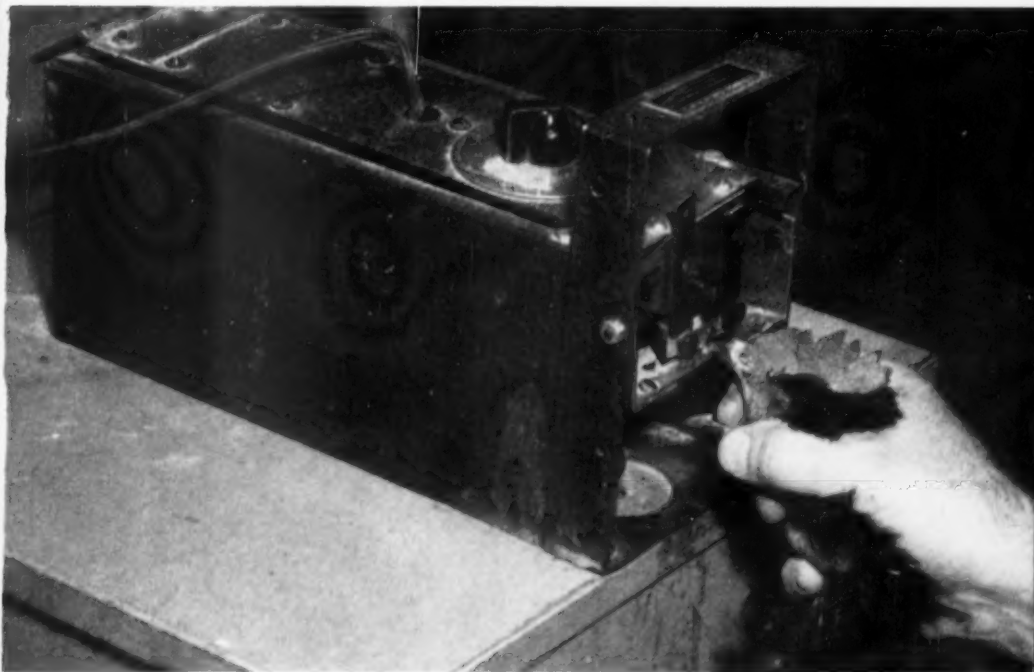


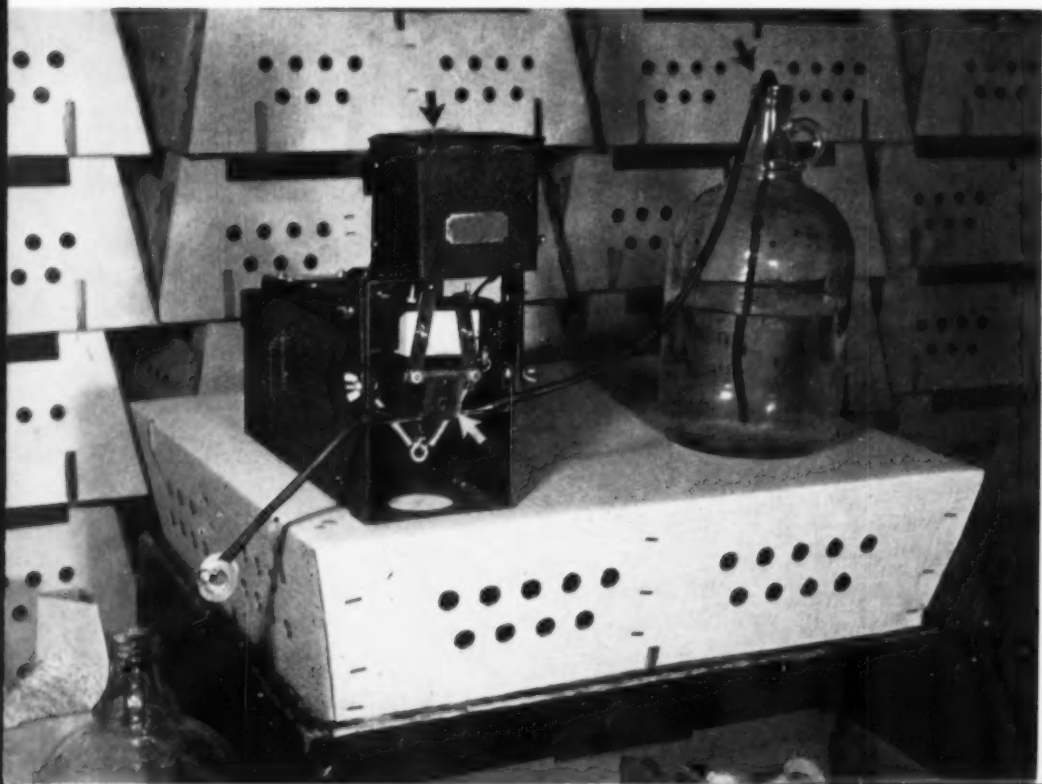


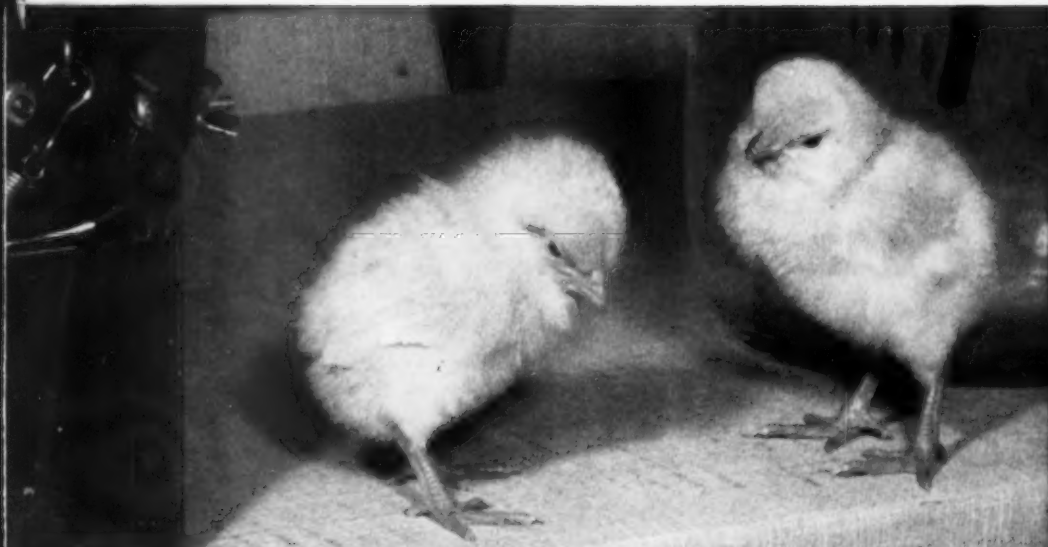
Figure 2. Debeaking baby chicks at the hatchery, showing debeaking "jig". Note position of chick.

trial and error, mortality often is severe. Too often they give no results at all. Some of these treatments should be used with caution or more serious trouble may result. Salt can be toxic to birds if too much is used. If it is used, do not use over one or two per cent salt added to the ration for four to five days or one heaping tablespoon of salt per gallon of water for one-half day and repeat in three or four days if necessary.

If cannibalism occurs, analyze the situation to try to find the cause. This will not stop the trouble at the time, but may help to prevent it another time.

Figure 3. Debeaking machine, showing chick guard (white arrow), cooling device for debeaker anvil, and automatic tripper on debeaker.





**Figure 4.** Debeaked chick and chick not debeaked, showing amount of beak removed when debeaking day-old chicks.

### Stopping Cannibalism

When cannibalism gets a good start, about the only way to stop it is to use pickguards, specs or blinders, or to debeak.

Debeaking has become most popular and is usually faster than putting on pickguards, specs or other controls.

Many poultrymen who have had flocks with cannibalism problems in the past debeak their flocks before trouble starts (figure 1).

### Debeaking Baby Chicks

Many broiler growers and some egg producers have their chicks debeaked at the hatchery (figure 2). If this is done properly, it will last through the broiler growing period (8 to 10 weeks).

Some researchers have found that chicks grow faster and feather much better when debeaked.

Care must be used in debeaking baby chicks to prevent troubles later.

The chick must be held at a 90° angle to the debeaker blade. If the beak is cut at an angle, many chicks will develop cross-beaks which result in poor growth.

A chick debeaking guard or "jig" should be used on the debeaker so that all chicks are debeaked the same amount (figure 3). It is almost impossible to debeak chicks uniformly

**Figure 5.** Correctly debeaked pullet to be used for replacement stock. Note amount of upper beak removed.



without a guard. The guard should be adjusted so that the lower beak is just nicked a little. This will remove about one-third of the upper beak (figure 4).

The guard or jig has a  $5/32$ " diameter hole through which the chick's beak is guided (figure 3). This hole may wear, and if it does, the attachment should be replaced.

Operators can develop considerable speed and still do a good job of debeaking chicks. Some can debeak up to 800 per hour. Skill should be developed before speed however.

Care should be observed in cauterizing chicks. Too little causes excessive bleeding, too much causes the beaks to appear white. When done properly the beak will be brownish at the point of cutting.

If replacement stock are debeaked as baby chicks, it will probably be necessary to do the job again before housing if protection is desired. Range-reared birds may have trouble eating grasses or legumes if debeaked.

The debeaker blade should be kept sharp to avoid crushing rather than cutting.



Figure 6. Debeaking a pullet, showing correct position of beak on anvil of debeaker. Note that beak is at  $90^{\circ}$  angle to debeaker.



**Figure 7.** Correct amount of beak to be cut off when debeaking pullet in production. Tip of beak is cut off to "quick".

### Debeaking Layers

To assure protection many poultrymen debeak all their laying stock before housing time. When this is done, the upper beak is cut and cauterized with the electric debeaker midway between the point of the beak and the nostrils (figure 5). This cuts into the "quick" or fleshy part of the upper beak which makes it tender and also prevents it from growing out. The electric blade cauterizes the fleshy portion of the beak to prevent serious bleeding.

### Method of Holding

To perform the debeaking operation grasp the feet of the bird with the left hand (provided you are right handed). Insert the index finger of the right hand between the upper and lower beak, as shown in figure 1. Guide the head with the thumb and

second finger. Rest the upper beak on the anvil of the debeaker at the point desired (figure 6), and press down slowly with foot\* so that cutting and cauterizing takes place. As the hot cutting blade reaches the anvil, the back of the chicken's head is raised slightly to bring the cut surface of the beak in more direct contact with the hot blade, thus doing a better job of cauterizing. The bird is then dropped to the floor carefully and the next bird is debeaked.

If the job is done properly there should be little or no bleeding. Bleed-

\* Debeaker can be equipped with automatic tripper and if this is used, the foot lever is eliminated for tripping.

**Figure 8.** Mature bird debeaked too severely. Note amount of upper beak that has been cut off. This is the correct degree of debeaking for 10- to 12- week-old pullets, not for mature birds.







Figure 9. The effect of debeaking severely at or after maturity. Note how lower beak has grown out and twisted, thus interfering with eating and drinking.

ing indicates low voltage, heat is not set high enough, or operator is going too fast

It is wise to have several extra feeders available with a generous amount of mash in each feeder. All feed should be fed in a trough for a day or two. The beak will be very tender and will discourage the hen from picking in the litter.

If debeaking is done on a flock already in heavy production because of an emergency, it is wise to debeak less severely than when debeaking pullets

before laying starts. In this situation the bird should be debeaked just back to the "quick" (figure 7). This will usually stop an outbreak of cannibalism but will not upset production as a severe debeaking job might do (figure 8). Many flocks have been debeaked while in heavy production without upsetting production at all.

If birds are debeaked severely the lower beak is more likely to grow very long (figure 9), and hinder eating and drinking, especially if shallow feed and water is maintained. If this occurs it may be necessary to cut off the lower beak so the bird can eat and drink properly.

#### Debeaking Turkeys

Many turkey growers debeak their poults when they are about 8 weeks of age. The operation is performed as with chickens but the cut is made about two-thirds the distance from the point to the nostril, to get a lasting effect. One week old poults are sometimes debeaked. When done this young, the beak usually grows out and the job may need to be repeated.

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